

## stranger things fanfic advent calendar by aethelreds

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

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**Language:** English

**Characters:** Becky Ives, Dottie (Stranger Things), Dustin Henderson, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers, Kali Prasad, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Terry Ives, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Eleven/Mike Wheeler

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**Summary:**

All my drabbles for the Stranger Things Fanfic Advent Calendar imported from my Tumblr.

## 1. hope

“Kali,” Dottie called. “It’s getting cold. You should come inside.”

Kali didn’t move, didn’t take her eyes away from the skyline. Or, what she could see of it. Really just the Sears Tower and a haze of light. She and her crew had relocated since the police had uncovered their hideout--they were still in the Tri-Taylor neighborhood, just a few blocks over from where they had been before. It’d been Funshine’s idea, to go right back to the old neighborhood. The cops wouldn’t expect them to be that stupid.

And yet. Here she was, bundled up, standing in front of the abandoned garage they were using. It wasn’t as spacious as the last place, didn’t have quite the same view of the skyline, or the same coverage for the van, but it worked. The police had no idea where they were, and that was the important thing.

Kali heard the echo of footsteps down the street; she held her breath, waited.

It was just a teenager, so absorbed in his own little world that he didn’t even see Kali watching him. She sighed, shifting her weight. She knew she was being stupid, and she knew that no matter what her friends said (or didn’t say), they thought she was being stupid, too. It was just. *What if Jane came back?* She’d found Kali once--she could find her again.

And there was that icy shard of fear, because *what if Jane **didn’t want to find her again?*** It wasn’t as if Jane had had a rollicking good time. She was, Christ, she was just a kid, and Kali had asked her to murder a perfect stranger. She’d asked so much of Jane, and when it had backfired, she couldn’t even protect her sister the way she’d promised she would. It was little wonder that Jane had chosen to go back to her friends, to leave Chicago and all that Kali had failed to give her.

Kali heard another set of footsteps, this time coming from the garage behind her. She knew without looking that it was Dottie. “Seriously, Kal, it’s cold as balls out here. If Jane’s coming back, she’ll know where to find you.”

Kali didn't say anything.

Dottie sighed and threw an arm around the shorter girl. "You hear me? She'll know."

"I know." Kali took a deep, shaky breath. "I know. I'm being stupid."

"You lost someone right after you found them," Dottie said quietly. "I get it. We all get it. We're just worried about you."

"Right."

"Kal, will you stop shutting us out? We want to like. Be there for you and shit." She held an expansive arm out towards the garage. "Now, inside, we have an *impressive* holiday spread, *if* I do say so myself. Axel even claims he made eggnog, although I'm ninety-eight percent positive it's just milk that went bad." She gave Kali's shoulders a squeeze. "So? Whaddya say? Come inside where it's warm."

Kali gave a short, tight nod. "Yeah. Okay." She allowed Dottie to steer her inside, wiped discreetly at the wetness on her cheeks.

Dottie was right. Jane would know where to find her. Kali just had to keep hoping Jane still wanted to find her.

## 2. gingerbread

“Dustin!” Lucas complained. “We’re not gonna have a gingerbread house if you *keep eating the gingerbread* !”

“What’s the point of making a gingerbread house if you can’t enjoy it?” Dustin complained. “By the time Christmas is over it’s too gross to eat!”

“Then why did you ask me to make a gingerbread house with you?!”

“I don’t know,” Dustin said defensively. “Because I just like hanging out with you, dude.”

“Oh.” Lucas seemed chastened. He worked in silence for a moment while Dustin nibbled on gingerbread. He hesitated. “Hey, Dustin?”

“What’s up?”

“Are you...okay with...me and Max?”

Dustin chewed on a gumdrop. “Yeah.”

“Are you *really* ?” Lucas pressed. “Because...I know that you liked her.”

Dustin shrugged. “Well, yeah, but...she likes you.”

“It doesn’t bother you?”

He shrugged again. “I mean, it kinda sucked, but you guys are good together. Plus it wouldn’t be fair to the ladies if I tied myself to one woman,” he added with a grin.

Lucas rolled his eyes but chuckled. “Sure.”

“Max is great, but I like her as a friend, and I don’t think we’d work out as a couple,” Dustin said. “You two make...sense.” He clapped a hand on Lucas’s shoulder. “As long as you’re still my friend, that’s all I really care about.”

Lucas looked touched at the admission. “Yeah...you too. Which is why...if you *do* have a problem with me and Max...”

“Dude, she’s a catch, don’t break up with her because of me,” Dustin snorted. “Look, we’re good, okay?”

“Okay.” Lucas smiled. “Now hand me the roof.”

“Uh...”

“What?”

“Uh....”

“You ate the whole roof?!”

“Maybe.”

“Dustin!”

“ *What ?!*”

### 3. snowball fight

They had barely set foot outside before Max was flinging herself into the snow.

“You’re gonna get snow in your pants again,” Dustin pointed out.

“I don’t care.” She waved her arms and legs, forming a snow angel. “I have to make up for the twelve years I didn’t have snow.” She accepted Lucas’s hand and stood up, admiring her handiwork.

Mike took El’s hand as the party trudged through the snow. It was a Saturday and the first real snow of the winter, so they were planning to spend all day outside. Max, Dustin, and Lucas were running around and laughing while El, Mike, and Will followed, watching their friends in amusement. Mike suddenly let go of El’s hand, held a gloved finger to his lips, and knelt. El watched him pack snow into one hand, patting and rounding it; he stood up and hurled the snowball at Lucas.

“Dude, what the hell!” Lucas shouted as everyone else roared with laughter.

Max stooped to form a snowball of her own. It exploded in a powdery puff against Lucas’s face.

“Stop!” he huffed.

“SNOWBALL FIGHT!” Dustin shouted, and everyone knelt down to pack snowballs.

El didn’t really understand, but she knelt beside Mike and Will and they showed her how to make a snowball. Her first few throws missed, but on the fourth try, she hit Dustin squarely in the back. The more she threw, the better her aim became, and soon she was running around and pelting snowballs like she’d been doing it her whole life. She even threw a huge snowball at Mike, and it hit him so hard that he fell down.

“Mike!” she exclaimed, running worriedly to his side. She hadn’t

meant to hurt him. “Mike, are you okay?” she asked, kneeling beside him.

He reached up and pulled her down beside him, tickling her. She squealed with laughter and got him back by shoving a handful of snow in his face. Mike sputtered.

“I’m sorry,” El laughed, brushing the snow from his face.

He rubbed his cold face against her cheeks, making her laugh again; she turned her head and caught his lips in a kiss. And Mike, helpless as always against the charms of his girlfriend, kissed her back, both of them completely oblivious to the snowball fight happening above them.

“You two gonna make out all day or what?!” Dustin asked before Max, Lucas, and Will all clobbered him with snowballs.

## 4. ice skating

It hadn't taken long after Steve and Nancy broke up for Lacy Jones to ask Steve on a date. He was pleasantly surprised and had accepted right away—Lacy was pretty and had a giggle like the tinkling of a bell. So, one Saturday in December, they went to the skating rink.

It was going great—they were holding hands and skating, talking about school and having a grand old time when someone yelled, “STEVE! STEVE! OVER HERE!”

It was Dustin, who was putting on skates alongside the other shitheads.

“You know them?” Lacy asked.

Steve hesitated.

“STEVE! STEVE HARRINGTON!”

“Yes,” he admitted.

Lacy glanced at Dustin, who was jumping up and down to get Steve's attention. “Wanna go say hi?”

“Uh, sure,” Steve said, because he didn't know what else to say. He and Lacy skated up to the kids. “Hey guys.”

“Hi Steve!” they said with varying degrees of excitement.

“Who are you?” Max asked Lacy.

“I'm Lacy,” she said, smiling. “And you are...?”

“Max,” the younger girl said. “Steve's our babysitter.”

Lacy looked puzzled. “You guys look kinda old for a babysitter...”

“It's like. A really long story,” Steve cut in. “You kids have fun.” He grabbed Lacy's hand and skated off with her.



“Is everything okay?”

“Peachy-keen.”

But everything was *not* peachy-keen, because the shitheads wouldn't leave Steve alone. When they weren't whizzing by him and Lacy, they were flat-out knocking into the couple. Will was the worst offender, so Lacy took pity on him and held his hands, showing him how to skate.

“Your friend is nice,” Dustin observed.

“She's not my friend, she's my *date*,” Steve said through clenched teeth.

“Oooohhhh. Why didn't you say so?” Dustin asked with a grin. “We'll leave you love-birds alone.”

This was a lie, because soon the shitheads had all formed a train behind Lacy, who kept laughing at their antics.

“Come on, Steve!” Dustin, the traitor, shouted, and with a sigh, Steve joined the end of the train.

When the shitheads took a break to get pizza from the concession stand, Steve felt that maybe he could still salvage the situation. He could not.

“Steve, I don't have enough money,” Dustin whined. “Can you buy me a Coke?”

“Why am I the one who has to buy you a Coke?” he grumbled, already reaching into his wallet.

“Thanks, Steve, you're the best!” Dustin sang as he made off with Steve's two dollars.

“Those kids really like you,” Lacy said.

Steve sighed. “I know.”

“Max told me you saved their lives.”

He glanced at Max, who was pretending not to watch them. "That is grossly exaggerating the situation."

"Well, I think it's really sweet," said Lacy. "You're a sweet guy, Steve."

He smiled at her. "Yeah, you're not so bad yourself."

She giggled, that cute little sound like a tinkling bell. "Maybe we can go out again...just the two of us."

"I can't make any guarantees with these troublemakers, but I'd really like that."

"JUST KISS ALREADY," Dustin bellowed.

Steve let go of Lacy's hand. "Excuse me one moment, I have to kill someone."

## 5. christmas tree

“I can’t believe you’ve never used a real tree before,” Hopper said as he hauled the tree into the house. When he’d invited Joyce and the boys to go Christmas tree hunting with him and El, she’d revealed that she’d never had a real one--just a scraggly fake one that she brought out every year.

“They’re just such a hassle,” she said.

“Yeah, but a *real tree*,” he emphasized from somewhere behind the fir’s thick branches.

“Well, now you can just cut down all my trees for me,” she said impishly.

“I guess I can.”

“You can *smell* it!” Will said excitedly. “Now you won’t have to light those scented candles, Mom.”

“I like those scented candles.” Plus she’d already bought five of them on Black Friday. They were on sale, okay? “Why don’t you and El go get the ornaments?”

They did, chattering excitedly while Hopper, Joyce, and Jonathan set up the tree. They got to decorating, Joyce laying out the tree skirt and vacuuming the fallen needles while the others wrapped the tree in lights and began hanging ornaments.

“Baby’s First Christmas?” El read, holding up a porcelain rocking horse.

“That’s Jonathan’s,” Joyce said with a fond smile.

“This is mine,” Will said, proudly displaying the teddy bear ornament.

El furrowed her brow. “Why?”

“You get ornaments to remember special occasions,” Hopper said.

“Like a baby’s first Christmas, or the first Christmas you spend as a married couple, stuff like that. When you go on vacations, shops have special ornaments so you can remember the time you took that vacation.”

“So...they’re not just for decoration?”

“Right—they’re like memories.”

“You can make your own, too,” Will said, showing El the macaroni ornament he’d made in kindergarten. “You don’t only have to buy them.”

El considered this. “How do you make them?”

“You can make anything you want, as long as it’ll hang on a tree.”

“Oh, Jesus,” Hopper groaned suddenly. “Half these lights are blown out.”

“You’re kidding!”

“You didn’t throw out the lights the demogorgon blew out?”

“I had bigger fish to fry, as you may recall.”

“Yeah, but now we have to start over.”

It took an absurd amount of time for Joyce and Hopper to unwrap the lights, start over, realize those lights were *also* blown out, and start on a third string. By the time they’d successfully lit the tree, they were content to flop back on the couch and let the kids finish decorating. They watched, bemused, as El carefully hung an ornament on the tree.

“What is that, honey?” Joyce asked, not recognizing it.

“It’s my ornament,” El said matter-of-factly. “Will helped me make it. So I can remember my first Christmas with a family.”

Joyce opened her arms. “Come here.”

She did, flopping down between Joyce and Hopper. They admired the tree--a real tree, with working lights and a single, glimmering ornament.

## 6. hot cocoa

“El,” Hopper calls from the counter, where he’s putting away groceries. “You want some hot chocolate?”

El twists around from where she’s been watching TV, her face wrinkled in a frown. “*Hot* chocolate?”

“That’s right.” He plops the box of Swiss Miss on the counter. El gets up to examine it.

“Why is it hot?”

“To keep you warm,” he says. “And because it tastes good.” When she still looks confused, he says, “It’s like chocolate milk, only hot instead of cold.”

She likes chocolate milk. She nods. “Yes. I would like...hot chocolate.”

Hopper smiles and fills the kettle with water. He lets it boil while he finishes putting away groceries. El turns back to watch TV, but when he opens the box of Swiss Miss she turns her attention back to him. She watches him take out the packets and pour them in mugs. When the kettle lets out a high, tinny whistle, he turns off the stove and pours boiling water into the mugs. El watches, fascinated.

“You have to stir it,” he explains as he hands her a spoon. They stir together, watching the chocolate swirl. “Now we have to wait a couple minutes so we don’t burn our mouths.”

El learned the hard way what happens if you eat hot food before it’s ready, so she nods sagely. They carry their mugs to the couch so El can keep watching *I Dream of Jeannie*. Hopper blows on his steaming mug and grins when El copies him. When he lifts his mug to taste it, she does the same, and for a moment the cabin is filled with the sounds of their slurping.

El smacks her lips (another thing she picked up from him—he really has to teach her better manners).

“Whaddya think?” he asks.

She nods. “I like hot chocolate.” She raises her mug to take an enormous gulp.

Hopper laughs, tousles her hair. For a brief moment, he remembers another young girl who liked hot chocolate. Only Sara never took hers plain—she always had to have three marshmallows.

*“One for me, one for mommy, and one for you,”* she’d say with that big smile.

Next time he’s out, Hopper resolves to buy marshmallows. He has a feeling El will like them.

## **7. christmas movies**

El always tried to see her mama and Becky once a month. Sometimes (often) they had to reschedule, and some months she didn't make it to their house at all, but Becky always understood--and El had a feeling that Mama did, too.

When El came to visit over one Thanksgiving weekend, Becky kept giving her sad little smiles.

"I'm sorry," she said after a while. "It's just...you look a lot like your mom when she was your age."

"Like Mama?" El had never heard that before.

"Yeah. Hang on, we have some photos..."

Becky pulled out old photo albums, and she and El spent hours poring over them. El could indeed see the resemblance between herself and a young Terry, especially as they got older.

"Hey, you know what? We have some home movies too."

It took them a while, but Becky was able to set up the projector from the attic; she positioned it so that Terry could watch with them. The home videos weren't great quality, but El could see her mother and Becky running around the backyard, laughing and throwing their arms around each other. The next segment was them at Christmas, waving at the camera while they stood in front of the tree.

It was hard to tell, but El felt sure that Terry understood what she was watching.

When Will drove her home that night, she told him about her day with the Iveses.

"I feel like she wasn't just watching, she was...seeing."

"She probably was," Will said. "She knows when you're there, so she probably comprehended what she was seeing."



El fiddled with the hem of her shirt. “Could you help me with something?”

He glanced at her. “What did you have in mind?”

The party (who were all in the Hawkins High A/V Club) helped El go through the Byers-Hopper family’s home videos and copy all of the ones that featured El onto new tapes. Terry only got to see El once a month, if even that—she didn’t get to see El growing and spending time with her family and friends. El was going to change that.

When El came to 515 Larrabee Road for her Christmastime visit, she brought three VHS tapes with her. She put them on for Terry, touching her hand when the first video started.

“That’s me,” she said unnecessarily. “These are videos of me and my other family. This way you can see me even when I’m not here.”

Terry didn’t say anything aside from her usual mantra, but El could’ve sworn she felt her mother’s hand move beneath hers.

## 8. carols

“Why the *fuck* are we going caroling?”

“It’s a family tradition,” Dustin said stubbornly. “Now put on your toboggan!”

Max growled and did as she was told. She had never gone caroling once in her life, and then suddenly her mom started dating Claudia Henderson and it became mandatory?

“Oh, don’t you two look so cute!” Claudia squealed as the kids joined her and Susan in the living room. “Get in front of the tree so I can take your picture!”

Dustin dragged Max in front of the tree, throwing a companionable arm around her and grinning. Max gave the camera a closed-mouth smile.

“Max!” her mother hissed.

Max pasted a grin on her face. Claudia squealed again as she took pictures.

“Oh, you kids look so *cute* ! The neighbors will just love it!”

“How many neighbors do you have?” Max asked anxiously.

“Oh, just dozens!”

Max stifled a groan.

Claudia and Susan led the way down the street while the kids followed, just out of earshot of the two women.

“And we have to actually sing?”

“What don’t you understand about caroling?” Dustin gave her shoulder a good-natured punch. “Come on, sis, it’ll be fun.”

“Okay, we are *not* siblings,” Max huffed. “Our moms have been on a

few dates, that's it."

"They seem to really like each other."

Max wavered. "Yeah...I guess."

They arrived at the first house; Claudia stage-whispered that they'd be singing "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" before rapping on the door. The neighbors who appeared beamed. "The Hendersons are caroling!"

Max watched in horror as a whole family gathered at the front door to watch them. She tried to just mumble the words at first, hoping no one would notice, but her mother gave her a stern look and she sighed.

It was like that all over the neighborhood. Most people knew about Dustin and Claudia's yearly tradition, and most of them seemed to like it; others pointedly refused to answer the door. A few people even gave them hot chocolate to keep them warm. Seeing how happy Dustin and his mom were, even seeing how happy her own mom was, made Max aware of how pouty she was being. She wasn't the only one who noticed; as they were heading over a street, Susan fell back to talk to Max.

"Honey, I know you don't like caroling," she sighed. "But it's really important to Claudia, and I just wish you'd be a little more...agreeable."

"You never caroled before," Max pointed out.

"No," Susan agreed. "But I thought it would be fun. I'm having a good time, aren't you? Don't you like Claudia?"

"It's just," Max blurted, "when you started dating Neil, we only did things that he liked, and...you know..."

"Oh, honey." Susan stopped, putting a hand on Max's shoulder. "This isn't like that. I just thought it would be a fun way for all of us to hang out. I promise we'll keep doing the things you and I like. And if there's ever something you really don't want to do, you don't have to do it."

“Promise?”

Susan smiled and held out her finger. “Pinky promise.”

That had been their thing ever since Max was little. It made her feel better.

“Come on, you two!” Claudia called. “Or do you want to turn into snowmen?” She laughed at her own joke.

“I like her,” Max said as she and Susan walked towards the other two. “And I like that she makes you happy.”

“Thank you, Max,” Susan said quietly.

Max sped ahead to catch up to the Hendersons. “Can we sing ‘Jingle Bells’ next?”

“Of course we can!” Claudia chirped.

Dustin threw an arm around Max again. “ *Jingle bells, Batman smells...*”

“*Robin laid an egg,*” she belted.

“ *The Batmobile lost a wheel and Joker took ballet, HEY!*”

## 9. family party

It was the first Christmas that Mike and El were married, and they wanted to throw a holiday party to celebrate. They were excited to have their friends and family come to their house and make merry, entertained by visions of everyone wearing Christmas sweaters and drinking eggnog and dancing and singing to Christmas music.

They could not have been more wrong.

The party was a disaster before it even started. Mike made four different trips to the grocery store because he and El kept forgetting things. The dog got into the cookies and threw up, like, everywhere, including the nice velvet dress El had been wearing, so she had to change into a green sweater that they realized too late looked like Mike's sweater, so he ran upstairs to change just as the doorbell rang. To make matters worse, Lucas and Max were fighting (again) and didn't want to come in case the other person was there, Nancy and Jonathan's flight from New York was so delayed that they probably weren't going to make it, and Mr. Sinclair slipped on the ice on his way over and had to be taken to the hospital because he'd broken his leg.

"This is a disaster," El said as she and Mike hurried to load the platters with more food.

"It'll be okay," he said with an optimism he didn't feel. "Most of the guest list is here, and they're all having a good time."

Of course, right as he and El walked out, they found Joyce and Murray in the middle of a heated discussion about celebrating Hannukah, and when Hopper tried to intervene, they both yelled at him before going back to yelling at each other. Mike decided now was an opportune time to take out the garbage; when he went out back, he found Holly and Erica smoking a joint.

"Holly, what the hell!" he shouted.

Holly opened her mouth to respond and coughed instead.

“It’s not that big a deal,” Erica said, blinking at him with red eyes.

Mike was torn between trying to be a cool older brother and trying to be a responsible older brother. He decided that being a selfish older brother was better, so he took the joint from Holly and took a deep drag.

“I need this more than you,” he wheezed, and then marched back inside.

It really was a disaster. Joyce, Murray, Hopper, and now Karen were all shouting at each other, Will and Noah had disappeared, and everyone else was sitting in the living room and watching the fight while eating caramel corn. Mike found El in the kitchen, wiping her eyes as she sliced the chocolate cream pie.

“Hey,” he said, wrapping his arms around her. “It’s okay, El.”

“It’s *not* okay,” she said in a thick voice. “It’s terrible. Everything is terrible.”

Mike opened his mouth to respond, but Dustin poked his head inside. “Guys, Lucas and Max have been there the whole time!”

“What?”

“Yeah, they both got here at the same time and started macking on each other instead of coming inside. They’re back together!”

El wiped her eyes again. “That’s good.”

There was a noise from the living room; the three of them went out and saw that Will and Noah were back with Jonathan and Nancy in tow.

“I’m so sorry we’re late!” Nancy said. “Thank god Will and Noah came to get us.”

El beamed as she hugged both of them. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

While they shed their coats and greeted everyone, Joyce came up to Mike and El. “I’m sorry about the shouting. Murray and I got...a little

excited.”

“It’s okay,” El said, but Joyce shook her head.

“It’s not okay. We’re adults. I promise it won’t happen again.”

El went back to the kitchen to get the chocolate cream pie. Mike followed her. “See?” he said, putting his arms around her waist. “Everything’s okay now.”

“ *Now* ,” she muttered. She turned to face him. “Let’s never throw a Christmas party again.”

“Never.”

She tilted her head up to kiss him, but they were interrupted by Holly and Erica stumbling in through the back door.

“Hey,” Holly said. “We are like...super hungry.”

“ *Super* hungry,” Erica agreed.

Dustin poked his head in the kitchen again. “Hey, uh, I think your dog is sick?”

Mike sighed, dropping his forehead against El’s. “Maybe we should wait to tell them about the baby.”

“Good idea.”

## 10. holiday cookies

Going on dates was hard when you couldn't drive, relied on your parents for transportation when it was too cold to ride your bike, and were hiding your relationship from your girlfriend's racist stepdad.

So instead of doing something cool or romantic, Max and Lucas found themselves making cookies in his kitchen. They were making a total mess, but they were having fun using the festive cookie-cutters and choosing sprinkles for each cookie. They made pink Christmas trees and green snowmen, and they spent a long time creating a rainbow snowflake. Before long, they ran out of the multicolor sprinkles. Max tried to open a new jar, but the top just wouldn't come off.

"Need help?" Lucas offered.

"No," Max said, but she still couldn't get the top to come loose.

"Allow me," Lucas said in his suavest voice. He took the jar from Max and tried to pry open the lid, but it was just as stubborn with him as it had been with Max. Until suddenly it popped, and the sprinkles flew everywhere. For several horrifying moments, Lucas watched as sprinkles bounced against the kitchen counters and rolled across the linoleum floor and skipped into the carpeted dining room. At last, the sprinkles stopped moving, and Lucas stood there in horrified silence.

Max burst into laughter. "'Allow me,'" she mocked in a spot-on imitation of Lucas.

He flushed. "At least I got it open."

Max cackled. "That's an understatement!"

Lucas sighed and went to get the hand-broom and dustpan. Max helped him, taking the vacuum cleaner from the closet and getting up the sprinkles that had spilled into the dining room. It took an embarrassing amount of time, and when they were finished the magic had pretty well gone out of making cookies. Max leaned on the vacuum, smirking at Lucas as he tipped the sprinkles into the trashcan.



“Shut up,” he muttered.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Yeah, but you’re saying it with your eyes.”

“True.”

He sighed again. “Man, why are our dates so lame?”

Max frowned. “You think they’re lame?”

He shrugged. “We can’t go anywhere unless someone else is with us. All we can do is...stay home and make cookies.”

“Well, yeah,” Max said. “But...I like making cookies with you. I like doing things with you because...you make even the lamest stuff fun.”

Lucas flushed. “Oh yeah?”

She nodded. “Yeah. I mean, I’d never make cookies on my own, but with you...it’s really fun. Even if you did spill sprinkles everywhere.”

Lucas’s flush deepened. “Oh. Okay.”

Max took the two steps to reach him and kissed him. He kissed her back, his arms going around her waist. They stood like that for a few minutes, until they heard someone making kissy noises.

“Erica,” Lucas growled.

“You guys are sooooo cute,” Erica teased.

Lucas moved to chase her, but Max pulled him back and kissed him for so long that Erica finally said, “Ugh, you guys are gross,” and stomped back up the stairs.

“I love you,” Lucas said, and then his eyes widened. “I mean, I love the way you, uh--”

“I love you too,” she said, kissing him again. “Now let’s put those cookies in the oven.”

## 11. snow day

Hawkins didn't really get snow days—like much of the Midwest, they were well stocked on salt, and the region got enough snow that everyone knew how to handle it.

But in January 1978, the worst snowstorm anyone in Hawkins had ever seen snowed everyone into their homes. Even those who could normally shovel their way out didn't because the windchill was forty below zero. The TVs and radios begged people to take every precaution and not leave the house unless absolutely necessary.

"Does this mean we don't have school?" Will asked from where he was snuggled up in front of the fire.

Joyce couldn't help laughing. "You definitely don't have school. And I don't have work."

Will's eyes widened. "Really?"

"Really." She wrapped her arms around him, nuzzling her nose in his hair. "We get to spend the whole day together."

"How long will it last?" Jonathan asked. He'd always been quiet, to the point of sometimes refusing to communicate verbally, but the more time he spent away from Lonnie, the more he was coming out of his shell.

"I don't know, sweetie. Probably a couple days."

"Can we go outside?" Will asked.

"I don't think that's a good idea. Maybe later. Right now, let's make some pancakes."

Will and Jonathan shouted in excitement. Joyce laughed, getting up and padding to the kitchen.

Life had been harder since she kicked Lonnie to the curb, but in many ways, it had been easier, too. It was quieter around the house now, and even though Joyce was struggling to make ends meet, at least

she only had to take care of two children now instead of three. And it had been *nice* , really, just her and her boys. It was like they'd been holding their breaths for so long, and now they were finally able to breathe. She used to dread being stuck in this house, had felt so trapped after she had Jonathan, but for the first time since moving here, she was looking forward to spending the whole day inside.

The three of them spent all morning in the living room, parked in front of the TV and eating pancakes in their pajamas.

"Do we have to put on clothes?" Will asked when it got close to noon.

Joyce shook her head, smiling. "Nope. You can stay in your pajamas as long as you like."

Will grinned and settled against her. Joyce wrapped one arm around him and one around Jonathan. "What should we do for lunch?"

"If we're in our pajamas, we should only eat breakfast," Will said with all the logic of a six-year-old.

"That's very wise," she said, nodding in agreement. "Bacon and eggs?"

"Yeah!" Will said.

"Can we have more pancakes?" Jonathan asked.

Joyce considered. "Let's have both."

Will threw off his blanket, running around in his racecar print pajamas. "I hope it snows forever!"

A foolish, selfish little part of Joyce hoped so too.

## 12. secret santa

Hopper stood in front of the scented candles for a long moment, deliberating. He didn't know what kind of scents women liked, particularly older women. Roses? Beaches? "Starlit Evening"?

"Why are we looking at candles?" El asked.

He heaved a sigh. "I got Flo for Secret Santa."

El furrowed her brow. "Secret Santa?"

"Yeah. It's this dumb game people play where you draw someone's name from a hat and you have to get them a present, but they're not allowed to know who it is until the end. I drew Flo's name."

El's eyes widened. "And you're just getting her a candle?!"

"Well...yeah?" He looked a little troubled. "Is that...bad?"

"Flo is always taking care of you! She deserves more than a candle!" El huffed.

"There's a ten dollar spending limit..."

El took his hand and dragged him to the home goods section. "Get her a crockpot."

"That is way more than ten dollars."

"Get her a teapot."

"Does Flo even drink tea?" he asked uncertainly. He genuinely didn't know.

El gave him a long-suffering look. "She keeps chamomile tea in her drawer for when she gets stressed out."

"She must drink it a lot, then," he joked.

She gave him another look. "She said she didn't start until you

became chief of police.”

His face fell. “...ah. Uh, yeah, let’s get the teapot.”

El beamed.

.

On Christmas Eve, Hopper found Flo at the station Christmas party and handed her a box wrapped in bright paper. He and El had tried and failed miserably, so they’d gotten Joyce to wrap it for them.

“Merry Christmas,” he said gruffly.

Flo opened the box and let out a little gasp when she saw the rose-printed teapot inside. “Oh, Chief, this is the nicest Secret Santa present I’ve ever gotten!”

Hopper smiled despite himself. “I’m glad.”

Flo leaned in so only he could hear her. “Make sure you thank that daughter of yours—she has good taste.” And she sauntered off, proudly carrying her brand new teapot.

Hopper scratched his beard. He should’ve known Flo would figure it out. Flo figured everything out, one way or another.

### 13. christmas spirit

Joyce's mother wrinkled her nose. "Well, you really got into the Christmas spirit...again."

Joyce rolled her eyes at Hopper as she took her mother's coat. "Well, you know, it is Christmas...that's the whole reason you're here."

"We're Jewish, Joyce."

"Thanks, Mom, I'm aware."

It hadn't been Joyce's idea for her parents to come for Christmas, but they insisted. More correctly, her mother insisted and her father just went along with his wife. They wanted to spend the holidays with Joyce's new and improved family. They'd never liked Lonnie--but then, they'd never exactly liked Hopper, either. Either way, this Christmas would be interesting.

"I just don't see why you should have such a goyische Christmas tree."

"Because I like it. End of story. Can I get you anything?"

"You can turn up the heat--it's so *cold* up here!" The Horowitzes lived in Florida now, and they liked to remind Joyce at every opportunity.

"I'll do that."

"When do the kids get home?"

"School lets out at 3:45, Hopper will pick them up."

"You call your husband by his last name?"

Joyce gritted her teeth. "Yes, Mom, I do."

Ruth made a noise like she was storing that information away for later. "Well, where am I sleeping?"

"In here." Joyce showed her parents to the office, where she'd made

up the pull-out sofa. That was one thing she missed about the old house--it had been so small that there wasn't any room for guests. Now that she and Hop had moved into a bigger house to accommodate their three kids, she didn't have an excuse for not putting up her parents. "I'll just let you two unpack." While they did that, Joyce went out to the wraparound porch. Hopper was already out there, leaning against the railing and smoking. He wordlessly handed the cigarette to her.

"They've been here for five minutes and I'm already gonna kill them," she said, sucking on the cigarette like it was a lifeline.

"I have something that'll help." Hopper reached into his pocket and produced a flask. Joyce snatched it out of his hands.

"Oh, thank god." She took a large swig of what turned out to be whiskey. "We're gonna need. So much of this."

"Yeah, don't worry, I already stocked up."

Joyce stood on her tiptoes to kiss him. "I love you so much."

He smiled, settling his hands at her hips. "I love you too." He leaned down to kiss her.

"Joooooyce!"

She breathed deeply through her nose. "I know you stocked up, but I need you to go to the store and buy more."

"More?"

" *More* ."

## 14. mistletoe

“But why do they *have* to kiss?”

“I mean, you don’t *have* to,” Will said as he handed El the hammer.  
“But you’re *supposed* to.”

El considered this as she hammered a sprig of mistletoe to the ceiling. Hopper and Joyce were still dancing around their feelings even though it was *painfully* obvious to everyone else that they were into each other, so Will and El had decided to give them a little push. They were hanging up mistletoe all over the place, because, they reasoned, Hopper and Joyce were *bound* to end up under at least one of them, and then they’d *have* to kiss.

“Why is there mistletoe everywhere?” Dustin asked when he came over for Dungeons and Dragons.

“We’re trying to get our parents together,” Will said.

Dustin shrugged. “Okay.”

He wasn’t the only person to notice; Max wrinkled her nose when she saw all the mistletoe. “The hell is this?”

“I don’t know,” Lucas said, “But I guess we *have* to kiss now...”

Max gave him a Look.

“Or not,” he said quickly.

“You don’t *have* to kiss,” El parroted. “But you’re *supposed* to.”

“Oh, whatever.” Max sighed and kissed Lucas, eliciting various reactions from their friends.

Mike was the last to join them, and as soon as he saw the mistletoe, he turned red.

“We’re supposed to kiss,” El reminded him.



“O-okay.”

“Okay,” Dustin said loudly as soon as they had pulled away, Mike even redder than before. “Let’s get this campaign started.”

It wasn’t a long campaign, but they weren’t anywhere near the end when Steve came by to pick up the kids.

“Who’s winning?” he asked, ruffling Dustin’s hair.

“No one,” Lucas responded gloomily.

“El’s holding up pretty well,” Jonathan said as he was passing through. She looked up at him to beam at the praise, but then her eyes widened.

“What’s up?”

She pointed. “Mistletoe.”

Everyone in the room whipped their heads at where Jonathan and Steve were, in fact, standing underneath a sprig of the sneakily-placed mistletoe. Then they looked at Steve and Jonathan, who were surveying the mistletoe with unreadable expressions.

“You don’t *have* to kiss,” Will said weakly.

“No, but they’re *supposed* to,” El piped up.

Steve looked at Jonathan. “You heard the girl.”

And they kissed.

The room exploded in shouts. Game pieces went flying into the air. Steve and Jonathan grinned as they pulled apart. “Yeah, by the way,” said Steve, “We’re dating now.”

“What about Nancy?!” Mike demanded.

The girl in question appeared at Jonathan’s elbow. “What about me?” She glanced up and pointed. “Oh look, mistletoe!” And she reached up to kiss both boys.

If Will and El hadn't been so preoccupied with the goings-on, they would have noticed that Joyce and Hopper had disappeared into Joyce's room a long time ago. The mistletoe had, it seemed, worked its magic.

## 15. christmas sweater

Max and Dustin's moms had really hit it off last year; though both initially claimed they weren't looking for anything serious, they soon came to change their tune. It had started with family dinners once a week, then several times a week, then exchanging keys, then a trip to the Grand Canyon, and finally the two women had decided to seal the deal and move in together. Max and Dustin, to their credit, were handling it with grace; they were happy that their mothers had found someone that made them happy, and they spent so much time together anyway that living in the same house wasn't really as weird as it could have been.

The prospect of their first Christmas together as a family was exciting. They went hog wild with decorations, turning their house into a veritable catalog display. Even Max, who made a point of never showing enthusiasm for anything, seemed in high spirits.

Until, that is, she came home from school to find what was possibly the ugliest sweater she'd ever seen before laid on her bed.

"Mom?" she called down the hall. "What is this?"

Dustin appeared in his own doorway holding an identical sweater. "You too?"

Claudia and Susan appeared in the same sweaters, grinning.

"We're gonna take a picture by the tree!" Claudia said excitedly. "Put on your sweaters!"

"You're...taking pictures of us? Wearing these?" Max asked, eyes widening.

"It's for the Christmas card," Susan piped up. "It'll be so cute!"

Max and Dustin exchanged horrified looks.

"Mom," Dustin said in his most reasonable voice. "Aren't Max and I...kind of old for this?"

“Oh, stop trying to be cool teenagers and just take a picture with your moms!”

“Do we...have to wear the sweaters?” Max ventured.

“Don’t you like them?” Susan asked, her face falling.

“Of course we do!” both kids lied.

“Then put them on and meet us in the living room!”

Claudia and Susan jingled away (literally jingled—their earrings were bells) and left Max and Dustin to regard one another with horror.

“We really have to do this, don’t we?” Max asked faintly.

Dustin began to pace. “It’s just a picture,” he reasoned.

“A picture they’ll send out to all their friends!”

“Right— *their* friends,” he pointed out. “None of our friends have to know.”

They considered it.

“Okay,” Max finally decided. “We take the picture, and then...and then we never speak of this again.”

So they pulled on the sweaters and went to the living room. Claudia and Susan had the camera set up on a tripod and put it on a timer; they got a series of increasingly embarrassing photos of the whole family posing by the tree like one of those families in an L.L. Bean catalog. As soon as Claudia was satisfied, the two teenagers raced to their rooms to shed the sweaters, shoving them under their beds so that they never had to look at the monstrosities again.

Or so they thought.

.

It was not long after the Christmas card photos were taken that the party was over at the Wheeler house. They were talking and laughing

as they moved into the kitchen to get snacks. Dustin, never shy about his hunger, was the first to get to the fridge. He stopped short in horror.

Everyone else stopped and looked at what caught his attention. Max's face paled. Everyone else was trying valiantly not to laugh.

"Mike," Dustin said. "What. Is that picture. Doing on your fridge?"

"Oh, your moms sent me a Christmas card," Karen trilled. "You all look so cute in your matching sweaters!"

Dustin and Max wanted to die.

## 16. elves

“Why are you so insistent on going to the mall?” Lucas asked as Max practically dragged them inside. “You *hate* the mall.”

“I’m not *insistent*,” Max said insistently. “There’s just like, nothing else to do, you know?”

“Well, what do you wanna do at the mall?” Mike asked. “All there is to do is shop and you hate that.”

“I love shopping.”

They stared at her.

“Friends don’t lie,” El said.

“I’m not lying!” Max said. “Okay, I don’t, like, *love* trying on clothes, but why do we always have to hang out in Wheeler’s basement?”

She had a point--they *did* always end up in Mike’s basement. And even if she was acting a little weird (okay, a lot weird), they could still have fun at the mall.

But Max didn’t seem to want to have fun at the mall--every time one of them stopped to look inside a store, she would get antsy and try to get them to leave.

“She’s acting weird, right?” Will muttered to Mike and El.

“Really weird,” Mike agreed.

“Come on, nerds, let’s go to the Häagen-Dazs!” Max called, dragging them out of the store.

“No, it’s so close to the line for Santa,” Lucas whined.

Max stuck out her lower lip. “Pleeeaaaaaase?”

Lucas threw up his hands in frustration. “You know I can’t say no to that face.”

“Ew, you can’t?” Mike said, scrunching up his nose.

“What, like you can say no to El’s face?”

Mike glanced at El, who was indeed giving him wide, innocent eyes. “I want ice cream,” she said softly.

“Okay,” Mike said automatically. “We’ll get you ice cream.”

So the five teenagers headed down to the Häagen-Dazs. As they passed the line to get a picture with Santa, Will stopped and pointed. “Oh my god, it’s Dustin!”

It was indeed Dustin, wearing an elf costume as he managed the line for Santa. The five teenagers approached him, trying to contain their delight. His face fell when he saw them.

“You told them,” he said accusingly to Max.

“I didn’t tell them!” she said. “Did I, guys?”

“You knew?!” Lucas shouted.

“Of course I knew--we live together, remember?” she snorted.

“And I made her *swear not to tell* !”

“I didn’t tell!” she said again. “I didn’t, did I?”

“She didn’t,” El confirmed.

“But she *did* insist on going to the mall,” Mike said.

Dustin glared. “Traitor.”

Max only smirked.

“So why are you doing this?” Lucas asked.

“Because I’m trying to buy a car so I can take girls on dates! Do you know how embarrassing it is when you have to ask your mom to borrow her car so you can take a girl to the movies?!”

“No, I don’t,” Lucas said with a proud grin. “But it’s cool that you’re saving to get a car. We won’t make fun of you...too much.”

“Speak for yourselves,” Max snickered. “I’m gonna make fun of him all the time.”

“Yeah, well, at least I have a job and will have my own car,” Dustin retorted. “And good luck getting a ride from me when I do!”

“I don’t need you, I have a devoted boyfriend to drive me everywhere,” Max said.

“I’m not your chauffeur,” Lucas protested.

Max stuck out her lower lip.

“Goddammit.”

“Hey Henderson!” an all-too-familiar voice shouted. It was Troy, hanging over the railing of the second floor with James. “Nice elf costume!”

“HEY GET BENT, TROY!” Max shouted up at him. When the others looked at her, she shrugged. “We’re the only people allowed to make fun of each other, right?”

Dustin grinned. “Hey, thanks, Max.”

“No problem, Elfie.”



## 17. snowflakes

Tessa wakes them up at six in the morning, her arrival preceded by the unsteady thump of her little feet on the carpeted floor. Her parents are still sleeping, or trying to, so she wriggles in between them while El pulls the comforter up around her shoulders and Mike drapes an arm over both his girls.

“It’s Saturday,” Tessa reminds them in a loud whisper.

“We know,” El says gently.

“Daddy said he’d play with me on Saturday.”

Mike lets out a small groan. “Let Daddy sleep a little longer.”

But even though Tessa tries, she’s three and squirmy, and it isn’t long before Mike and El give up and get up. They have a sleepy, unhurried breakfast, one where Tessa gets syrup all over herself, and after they’ve wiped her clean and bundled her up, Mike takes her hand and leads her out into the snowy backyard. El watches from the window, still in her pajamas, a warm mug of tea in her hands. She’s taken Tessa out into the snow before, but there’s something special about *Daddy* doing it. He talks so much more than El, who grew up learning to speak in silence, who only used words as necessities. Mike is the middle child, was always fighting to be heard over his sisters, for his eternally dozing father to wake up and notice him. Talking comes naturally to him. El can’t understand anything he’s saying, but she can see him talking, can see him pointing and explaining while Tessa listens, her eyes wide beneath her hood and scarf.

It’s silly, but even though she can see them and they’re only a few yards away and she sees them every day, El begins to miss her husband and daughter. She knows it’s clingy, but she misses them so much that she puts down her mug and throws on a scarf and coat and boots before wading out to them.

“Mama!” Tessa shouts, waddling towards her mother. El catches her just before she tips over, settles her against her hip and carries her to where Mike is still kneeling in the snow.

"You'll get cold," he chastises, but he's smiling at her and looking at her in that way he always does. Like she's the most perfect thing he's ever seen.

"I was lonely." She sets down Tessa, who waddles off to explore the backyard, and kneels beside Mike, grateful she wore flannel pajamas.

Mike takes her bare hands between his gloved ones, kneads them tenderly. "You're gonna get sick."

"You won't let me get sick." And it's true--he won't. He raises his eyes to hers and El can see snowflakes in his long, perfect lashes. He really is the most beautiful person she's ever seen. She learned a long time ago that boys-- *men* --don't like to be called beautiful, that they're not *supposed* to be beautiful, but she really does think that he's beautiful. She thinks that she's so lucky, to look at this face every day, that it's the first thing she sees when she wakes up and the last thing she sees before she falls asleep. "You're perfect," she says out loud, pure and unabashed.

A long time ago, he would have blushed, but they've been together too long and through too much for something so simple and sweet to faze him. He just smiles, says, "So are you," and then he kisses her like it's been ages, like it wasn't less than twenty minutes ago when she wrapped a scarf around his neck. "You should put on warmer clothes," he says when they pull apart, foreheads and cold noses touching.

"You can warm me up when we get inside." She gets up, crouches beside Tessa as the little girl pokes at the icicles hanging from the birdbath. El looks over her shoulder and sees Mike, still looking at her like she's perfect with snowflakes in his lashes.

## 18. sleigh ride

“What is a sleigh ride?”

Mike looks up from his chemistry homework. “A sleigh ride? It’s...it’s something people used to do in the olden days. A sleigh was like...it was like a car, but it was pulled by horses and the top was open so you could see all around you.” El considers this. “Did you hear it in a Christmas song?”

She nods. “Do people still...sleigh ride?”

He thinks about it. “I don’t...think so? Maybe some places have it but I’ve never seen one in Hawkins.”

“Oh.” It’s a little disappointing—everyone in the songs always seems to have a good time when they sleigh ride. And one of the songs even talks about being snuggled up together, and El likes any excuse to be snuggled up with Mike.

“What is it?” he asks, seeing the disappointment in her face.

She shrugs. “It sounds fun.”

Mike looks at her for a long moment.

“What?” she asks, a little self-conscious.

He leans across his chemistry homework and kisses her. “Nothing.” And then he turns back to his homework, both of them grinning.

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El doesn’t really think about their conversation until a few days later, when she hears the special knock. She unlocks the door and beams when she sees Mike. She wasn’t expecting him today, but he’s a welcome surprise.

“I have something for you,” he says. “We’ll be outside, though.”

El nods and quickly pulls on her winter things, smiling when Mike

helps her into her coat. When she's finally ready, he takes her hand and leads her outside. They walk past the tripwire and down to the road, where Steve's car is idling. Tied to the trunk is a sled.

"I know it's not the real thing," Mike says quickly. "I just thought...you seemed like you really wanted to go on a sleigh ride, and it's the same basic principle...but if you don't want to you don't have to..."

"I love it. Let's go," she says, tugging him to the sled. She sits at the front and Mike eases in behind her, her legs between his and his arms holding her from behind. He produces a blanket and tucks it around their laps, drawing it up to El's chin so she won't get cold.

"You lovebirds ready?" Steve calls, leaning out his window. El makes a mental note to give him a really nice gift this year. Mike gives a thumbs-up, and Steve rolls forward, dragging the sled behind him. He refuses to go more than ten miles an hour, but that's okay, because the snow-covered world is passing like a lovely dream, and Mike feels sure and strong and warm behind her.

"Is this super lame?" he asks.

El shakes her head. "This is perfect," she says, and she means it. Trust Mike to make the impossible possible.

## 19. toys

“Dad,” El sighed. “You really have to stop spoiling the kids.”

“No I don’t,” Hopper said proudly, surveying his work. “I’m a grandpa, I’m supposed to spoil my grandkids.”

Tessa and Ben looked up from where they were surrounded by a mountain of wrapping paper, dimpling at their mother.

“I got a fighter jet!”

“I got a magician kit!”

“I got—“

“Okay, okay,” Hopper said with a nervous laugh. “No need to tell your mom every detail.”

El rolled her eyes but smiled. She was glad that her kids could have such a normal—and generous—Christmas. She hadn’t even known what Christmas was at their age.

Mike came back from the kitchen carrying a coffee with Bailey’s and a plate full of Eggos. He sat beside El and shared his breakfast with her.

“I want Eggos!” Tessa exclaimed.

“Hmm, guess you’ll have to put down your toys first,” Mike said.

Tessa looked horrified at having to decide between breakfast and toys.

“Don’t worry, sweetie, I’ll get you Eggos,” Joyce said, getting up. “You can eat them *and* play with your toys.”

“Mom,” El groused.

“It’s Christmas!” Joyce said. “Besides, we have to vacuum after we clean up the wrapping paper, might as well.”

“Don’t,” Will said when El opened her mouth. “You know how she gets.”

El *did* know, and she also knew that resistance was futile. Her adopted parents loved being grandparents. They were almost as bad as Mike’s own mother, who was the perfect stereotype of the wealthy grandmother who threw wads of cash at her grandchildren. Speaking of, they were due at her house for dinner, and the kids would be getting another mountain of presents. She made a mental note to unload all the presents from the car before they drove over to Karen and Murray’s.

Ben held up the fighter jet he’d gotten. “Mama, can you make it fly?”

“It’s not a party trick,” she said, but she gave in and levitated the fighter jet anyway. It was fun, okay?

“ *Now* who’s spoiling them?” Hopper teased.

“Buying out Toys’R’Us was a little excessive, Dad.”

“We didn’t *buy it out* .”

“Kids, I think your mama’s jealous she didn’t get any toys.”

El dropped the fighter jet on Hopper’s head.

## 20. stockings

When Kali woke up, she believed, for a moment, that everything that had happened yesterday was a dream. Getting a vision from Jane, hopping on a bus to Hawkins, and blindly following the vision in her head to a cabin in the middle of the woods couldn't have really happened, could it?

But when she opened her eyes, she realized it *did* happen. This was not her bed. This was not her room. This was not an abandoned garage in a slummy neighborhood in Chicago.

She sat up slowly, blinking against the pale winter sunlight. She was wearing makeshift pajamas—a man's oversized flannel shirt, children's sweatpants that fit her just a little too snug. Only her underwear and the Ramones tank top were hers.

Through the wooden door, she could hear the muffled sounds of a television. Kali rubbed her eyes and got out of the bed, shuffling out of the tiny bedroom. Jane was sitting on the threadbare couch in the middle of the cabin, her eyes on something in her lap; as soon as she heard Kali, she turned around and smiled. "You're awake."

"Yeah," Kali rasped. They'd stayed up so late talking, and now her throat was raw. She went to the kitchen and poured a glass of water. "Your policeman...?"

"He's at work. It's just us today."

Kali nodded. "Good." She padded to the couch and sat on the end, tucking her legs beneath her. "What are you doing?"

El was sewing something on what looked like an oven mitt. She glanced shyly at Kali. "I'm making you a stocking."

"A what?"

"A stocking," El enunciated. "Hung by the chimney with care."

Kali glanced at the fireplace, where two stockings indeed hanging with care. One had an E, and the other an H.

“We don’t have anymore stockings,” El apologized. “So I’m making one.”

Kali couldn’t remember the last time she’d had a stocking. Had it been with the family that had hidden her and cared for her before Brenner got to them? Or it had it been before all of this, when she was Kali Prasad and not 008? Her heart twisted in her chest and she felt dangerously close to crying again. “Thank you, Jane,” she said, her throat tightening. She scooted down until she was beside her sister, stroking that curly hair. “I’m so glad I’m here with you.”

“I’m glad you’re here too,” El whispered. They hugged one another, squeezing tight. In El’s lap was a blue oven mitt, and half-sewn onto it was a shaky, terry cloth *K* .

It was the most beautiful thing Kali had ever seen.



## 21. winter wonderland

The Saturday after Thanksgiving, Karen started pulling the Christmas decorations out of the attic.

“Oh no,” Mike and Nancy said, and then ran to the window. Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair were already putting up their decorations, a kind of manic gleam in their eyes.

“Oh no,” Mike and Nancy said again.

Every year, the Wheeler and Sinclair parents put aside their usual friendly neighborliness and entered a fierce rivalry. The source of this rivalry? Christmas lights.

No one was really sure how this Christmas light rivalry started, only that it had been going on forever, and each year was wilder than the last. The two houses had so many Santa Clauses, reindeer, elves, polar bears, penguins and candy canes that it was really quite a fearsome sight to behold. They even made it into the paper, which called it “Hawkins’s Own Winter Wonderland”, and residents of the small town came from far and wide to see the tacky forest of blinking lights.

Mike and Nancy hated it. Lucas hated it too. Will was too polite to say anything, but Dustin flat-out laughed at their yards.

Maybe it was because Nancy had recently had a traumatic experience involving Christmas lights. Maybe it was because El had taught Mike and Lucas to be brave. Whatever the case, the three kids decided in the Christmas of 1983 that they had to put their collective feet down. And to do that, they would need Joyce Byers’s help.

“You want me to what?” she asked in disbelief when Mike and Lucas approached her about their plan.

“Our parents go nuts and it’s driving *us* crazy,” Lucas said. “The only way they’ll stop is if someone *makes* them stop.”

“Like the law,” Mike piped up.

“Exactly—but the chief has never done anything about it before—“

“—so we were hoping you could talk to him about it,” Mike finished. “Since he listens to you.”

“Hopper doesn’t listen to anyone,” Joyce said, but she looked thoughtful.

“Use your feminine wiles on him, Miss B.”

“Dustin, shut up!” hissed Lucas.

“Come on, Mom,” Will urged. “Everyone hates those lights. They make me think of...you know. The demogorgon.”

Joyce straightened up. “Those lights are coming down. Now go play, I have a phone call to make.”

.

They weren’t sure if it would work until a couple nights later, when Hopper appeared at the Wheelers’ front door. The boys had all been in the basement, but they crept up the stairs when they heard him arguing with Ted and Karen.

“This is ridiculous! We’ve never gotten complaints before!”

“Yeah, well, you’re getting them now,” Hopper said indifferently. “Besides, it’s light pollution.”

“*Light pollution*?” Ted repeated skeptically. “Is that real?”

“Damn straight,” Hopper said with a grave face. “I’m gonna need all those lights to come down, or you will get fined by the city of Hawkins. I’ve already told the Sinclairs.”

After he left, Karen turned to the boys and Nancy (who had come downstairs when she heard their visitor) with a crestfallen face. “Bad news, kids—we have to take down the Christmas lights in the front yard.”

“Oh no,” Mike and Nancy said convincingly.

“Gee, that sure is a disappointment,” Dustin deadpanned.

“I know,” Karen sighed. “Light pollution, honestly...”

The very next day, the boys, Nancy, and Steve all helped the Wheelers and Sinclairs take down the lights. They were supposed to put everything in the attic, but secretly, they loaded everything into Steve’s car. It took several trips to the dump and a great deal of subterfuge, but it was worth it to know that the lights would never haunt them again.

It was nearly a week later when the Wheelers were driving back from dining out that they passed a yard covered in very familiar lights.

“They have the same lights as us!” Karen declared.

Mike and Nancy exchanged panicked looks.

“I’m sure they bought them at the same store,” Nancy said quickly.

Karen clucked her tongue. “Well, we’ll have to call the police and let them know about this light pollution.”

Mike and Nancy exchanged looks again, biting their lips to keep from laughing.

## 22. silver bells

Mike came home from class to find Will and El decorating the three-foot-tall plastic tree they'd found at the Dominick's around the corner. They were giggling as they hung the kitschy ornaments they'd bought in gift shops and at the Christmas market downtown, Christmas music crooning from the radio. El hung her Sears Tower ornament on a branch and then skipped over to Mike, wrapping her arms around him before he'd even taken off his coat. He really liked coming home to El. It was so...grownup.

It wasn't *as* grownup that Will was there a lot of the time too, because they were students after all and rent was cheaper split three ways rather than two, but...still. On Tuesdays and Thursdays he'd come home to their sardine-can apartment, and as soon as Will left for his evening class they'd have the apartment to themselves. And they didn't *always* do that other grownup thing that they tried not to do if Will was around; sometimes they just did homework or watched TV or made dinner.

"Can we go downtown tonight?" she asked him now.

"We went downtown last night," he said, but he was smiling. All three of them had taken the train to the Loop and wandered all over the place, just content to be tourists in their own city. It had been one of the nicest nights Mike had ever had.

"Yeah, but I want to go again," she said, peering at him through her lashes.

Mike kissed the tip of her nose. "Okay. But let's not stay out so late this time--we both need to study."

El beamed and began putting on her winter things.

"Have fun," Will said.

"Hey, we're just gonna go see the Pinocchio display at Marshall Field's again--you get to draw more naked people."

Will rolled his eyes. "I'm not a prude, but I am sufficiently done with seeing naked people. Thank god this is the last day of class."

"So what're you gonna do for your final?" El asked, tugging on a boot. "Draw an orgy?"

Mike barked with laughter. Will flipped off his adopted sister.

As soon as El had put on her boots, scarf, coat, hat, and gloves, she took Mike's hand and all but dragged him to the train station. It was crowded with commuters coming home from work, so Mike held the grip with one hand and wrapped his other arm around El, holding her snugly against him so she wouldn't get tossed around. She held onto his waist, gazing up at him. Every few moments he leaned down to kiss her, much to the irritation of the commuters around them.

They got off at Washington and walked the couple blocks to the Marshall Field's, where throngs of tourists gathered around the windows. Sitting along the streets were men drumming on big, empty buckets. Further down, they could hear bright, brassy horns playing "Deck the Halls", and on nearly every corner was someone from Salvation Army, merrily ringing their bells. The sun had set an hour ago, and El's head kept turning as she took in the city lights. It was one of the things Kali always laughed about--how even though El had lived here for two and a half years, she still acted like she'd never seen this city before.

"I almost don't want to go home for Christmas," El admitted.

"I know what you mean." Hawkins was home and always would be, but it just didn't compare to Chicago in terms of holiday spirit. There were no elaborate window displays in Hawkins, no bucket drums and brassy horns and Salvation Army Santas ringing their bells. Worst of all, he'd be staying with his family and El would be staying with hers, and even though they'd probably see each other every day, he wouldn't be able to come home to her and wake up next to her like he was used to. He wished, not for the first time, that they could just get married already.

As if reading his mind, El said, "It'll be like we're in high school again. Like the fact that we live here together...doesn't matter."

“We’ll talk on the SuperComm,” Mike said, half-joking and half-deadly serious. “Say goodnight and good morning.”

“Yeah,” she sighed. “It won’t be the same, though.”

“Yeah.” He squeezed her hand. “It’s only for two weeks. And we’ll still see each other during the day.”

“Yeah.” She pulled him to the side, away from foot traffic, and tugged on his scarf. He obediently leaned down to kiss her. “I love you so much, Mike,” she murmured when they’d pulled apart.

“I love you so much, El.” He kissed her again. “Just two weeks. Then we’ll come back here--”

“And kick out Will for a few hours.”

“Please, he’ll be tripping over his own feet to get out of there.”

They kissed again, smiling against each other’s lips, and this time the Salvation Army Santa beside them grumbled, “You are *surrounded* by hotels,” punctuating the reprimand with an aggressive jingle.

“Merry Christmas to you, too,” said El. She took Mike’s hand, and they wandered down the street, their ears ringing with bucket drums and brassy horns and silver bells.

## 23. tinsel

Hopper came home and did a double take when he saw forks, knives, and spoons strung up all over the cabin. “El?”

She glanced at him from where she was watching television. “Yes?”

He gestured to the silverware. “What is all this?”

“Tinsel.”

He blinked. “What?”

“Tinsel,” she said, enunciating. “Strung up like in the songs.”

It took Hopper a minute before he realized what had happened. “These aren’t tinsel,” he said in a kind voice. “These are *utensils* . Tinsel is...shiny papery stuff.”

El looked heartbroken. It had probably taken a lot of effort to string up all those forks and knives and spoons.

“But you know what, it looks great,” he added hurriedly. “In fact, I like it better than tinsel.”

El gave him a shy smile. “Really?”

“Really,” he said, nodding. “Let’s make it a new tradition. No more tinsel--that stuff is flimsy anyway. And silverware is functional all year ‘round. And it’s definitely...unique. No one else will have Christmas decorations like ours.” He reached out to ruffle her hair. “You hungry?”

“Yes.”

Hopper popped two Hungry Man meals in the microwave; when it came time to pull them out and puncture the foil, he opened the silverware drawer and found...nothing. El had really strung up every last utensil in the cabin.

“Hey kid,” he called. “Can we take down two of the forks for

dinner?”

El considered it. “Okay.”

It was going to be a long holiday, Hopper thought, if they had to keep reusing the same two forks. But he had to admit--he kind of liked the silverware decorations.



## 24. santa claus

"This is stupid," Dustin said.

"You're just saying that because you drew the short straw this year," Max said as she cheerfully plopped a hat on his head.

"I drew it last year, too."

"Guess you just have bad luck, amigo."

Dustin touched his beard. "Do I *have to*?"

"Yes," El said simply.

Dustin sighed. "Okay." He took a deep, cleansing breath, and then barrelled into the living room. "HO-HO-HO!" he boomed. "MERRY CHRISTMAS!"

The children gathered there screamed with delight.

"He really does look stupid," Lucas said in a fond sort of tone.

"I know," Max cackled, snapping a picture of Dustin wearing a stuffed Santa costume. "God, I hope he draws the short straw every year."

## 25. gifts

The first Christmas after the divorce was a small and sad one. Joyce was broke from legal fees and Lonnie's refusal to pay alimony, and while her job at Melvald's would be enough to support her and the boys, it wasn't enough to give them a real Christmas. She took advantage of her employee discount to buy socks and small toys; when she wrapped them using last year's leftover paper, she felt sick to her stomach looking at the pitiful collection. She'd explained to the boys that they didn't have a lot of money and Christmas would be small, and they seemed to understand--but that didn't make Joyce feel any less guilty.

When Christmas morning arrived, it was a monumental effort to get out of her bed and into the living room. She watched with a halfhearted smile as her boys opened their presents—which took all of five minutes. The boys pasted smiles on their faces, murmuring thanks, and it was more than Joyce could handle. She said she wasn't feeling well and went to lie down, muffling her cries in her pillow.

About an hour later, she heard a tentative knock on the door. "Mommy?"

She didn't respond, but Will and Jonathan came in anyway, sitting on her bed.

"I got you a Christmas present."

"Oh, Will," she groaned. "I told you to save your money..."

"I didn't spend any." He handed her a piece of paper, on which he had drawn a necklace. "This is a diamond necklace." He handed her another piece of paper. "And this is \$100." He had, indeed, drawn a green square with "\$100" scrawled in crayon. "And *this* is a puppy."

Joyce started crying all over again. "These are such wonderful presents," she said around the hardness in her throat. "Thank you so much, baby."

"Maybe you can draw presents, too," Jonathan suggested quietly.

“We can all draw presents.”

Joyce’s heart broke just a little bit, but she smiled and hugged her boys to her. “Yeah. Yeah, that sounds nice.”

“I’ll draw breakfast,” Will offered.

“Oh honey, we can make a real breakfast.”

“Yeah, but I can draw eggs that aren’t burnt.”

“Hey!”

## 26. ice storm

“This is certainly a predicament,” El said as she and Mike poked their heads out her window.

“I’m screwed,” Mike said. “Your dad is gonna kill me.”

It had been so romantic at the time, Mike sneaking in and spending the night with El. In the morning, however, looking at the ice on everything, it felt significantly less romantic and infinitely more foolish. There was no way he’d be able to drive home before Hopper figured out he’d been there all night, and with the roads all icy and Mike’s car probably frozen over, he didn’t have an escape route.

El considered. “I could float you down to the ground...and then you could knock on the door and pretend you just got here?”

“El, the roads are totally iced over. There’s no way anyone would buy that.”

She bit her lip. “Yeah, that’s true.”

Mike ran a hand through his hair. “Shit. Fuck. This is my last hour on earth.”

“You’re being dramatic.”

“What, like your dad *isn’t* gonna kill me when he finds out I’ve been here all night?”

A knock on the door made both of them jump.

“El, I’m making waffles,” Hopper said. “Tell Mike he can have some too.”

The two teenagers exchanged horrified looks.

“I know everything,” Hopper said through the door.

“I’m dead,” Mike whispered.

“At least he’s giving you a last meal.”

“You are *not helping* .”

## 27. fireplace

“Kali.”

“What?”

“This is not a fireplace.”

“Of course it is. It’s a place with fire.”

“Oh my god. Kali. That is not how a fireplace works.”

“I’m from England, Steve, I think I know what does and does not constitute a fireplace.”

“This is literally just a trash can with a fire in it.”

“Right.”

“That is not a fireplace.”

“Not with that attitude.”

“A fireplace has brick and you can sit beside it.”

“Oh I’m sorry, I didn’t know you had your PhD in fireplace architecture.”

“You led me here under false pretenses. You told me you had a fireplace that we could snuggle beside.”

“I told you I had a fireplace. I said nothing about snuggling.”

“It was implied.”

“The same way you implied I had a brick fireplace?”

“We’re breaking up.”

“Stop being such a baby and come snuggle with me.”

“Beside an on-fire trashcan? I don’t think so.”

“Where’s your sense of adventure?”

“Fireplaces are not supposed to be adventures.”

“Sounds like quitter talk.”

“I’m going home.”

“It’s negative five degrees.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

“Steve.”

“Kali.”

“ ... ”

“FINE. But next time you have to specify what kind of fireplace.”

“After this hissy fit, I certainly will.”

## 28. sledding

"This is a terrible idea," Nancy said.

"Come on, it'll be great," Steve said gamely.

"You'll *die* ."

"We will not *die* . We will get lightly injured at worst."

"Speak for yourself," said Jonathan. "I'm using you as a human shield."

"And I will happily defend you." Steve kissed his boyfriend.

"And I'll point and laugh," Nancy supplied.

Steve stuck out his tongue. He and Jonathan had built the sled, though perhaps "built" was a generous term. It implied that something had actually been constructed, when in reality they had cobbled together old wood and metal into something that could only loosely be called a sled. They were taking it out now, much to Nancy's chagrin.

"You'll be eating those words, Wheeler," Steve said as the three of them reached the crest of the hill.

She rolled her eyes. "Well, if you break your necks, don't come crying to me."

"Yes, Mom."

The boys high-fived at Jonathan's sick burn. Nancy rolled her eyes again.

Jonathan climbed in first, Steve climbing in behind him. Steve wrapped his arms and legs around the other boy. "Okay, Nance. Give us a push."

"I don't appreciate you making me an accessory to murder," she said, but she put her boot on the end of the sled and gave a good, hard



shove.

The sled glided down the hill--for a moment. Then it creaked and groaned, and with a loud crack, the sled collapsed, sending Steve and Jonathan tumbling down the hill.

"Guys!" Nancy shouted, stumbling down the hill after them. They landed in a heap at the bottom of the hill, Nancy skidding to a stop just above them.

"Holy shit," Jonathan said faintly.

"I saw my life flash before my eyes," Steve said.

As soon as it became apparent that they were not injured, Nancy scowled. "You idiots, I told you it wouldn't work!"

Steve gave her his very cutest frown. "I have a boo-boo. Kiss it better?"

"No."

"Pleeeeeaaaaase?"

Nancy hesitated, so Jonathan grabbed her and tugged her down to join them in the snow. Both boys pinned her down, smothering her with cold kisses while she giggled helplessly. "I told you it was a terrible idea!"

"We aren't dead," Jonathan pointed out.

"Shall we try it again, Jonathan?"

"No," Nancy said firmly, tugging them both down to kiss her again.

## 29. peppermint

Look, they hadn't *meant* to get drunk. It was just. They'd been talking, one of those long, deep talks that everyone needs to have once in a while. And then Karen had pulled out the ridiculous bottle of peppermint schnapps Claudia had given her as a gag gift, and Joyce had said I'm not drinking fucking peppermint schnapps, and Karen had said who are you and what have you done with the real Joyce, because the *real* Joyce never turns down free booze, and Joyce had said fuck you're right, and that was how they'd ended up on Karen's kitchen floor, plastered and laughing their asses off.

"Tell me, Joyce," Karen slurred. "Have you and Hopper started doing the dirty yet?"

"Oh yeah," Joyce said candidly. "We've been goin' at it like rabbits for *weeks*."

"You didn't tell me!" Karen shrieked. "I thought we were friends!"

"We are!" Joyce whined. "I'm just not supposed to tell anyone! So you can't tell anyone else about this, okay?"

"My lips are sealed," Karen promised, knowing full well she was going to call up Claudia and tell her everything as soon as Joyce left. "So what's he like in bed?"

"He's *really* good." Joyce took a swig, making a face at the sickeningly sweet flavor. "Y'know how most guys with big dicks don't know how to use 'em? Hop *definitely* knows how to use his."

"I knew he was hung!" Karen shouted with glee.

"God, so hung."

"Jim Big Dick Hopper."

Both women cackled.

It was at that moment that Nancy came down from her room. "Are you guys drunk?" she asked in dismay.

Karen waved a careless hand. "I don't get drunk, I just have fun."

"Mom!"

Karen shook Joyce's knee. "You should call Jim Big Dick Hopper to take you home!"

They both cackled again.

"Seriously, Mom, it's the middle of the day!"

" *You're* in the middle of the day."

" *Mom.* "

### **30. snowman**

“El!” Hopper shouted from his room. “Have you seen my hat?”

“Out here,” she called.

Hopper lumbered out to the porch and frowned. “Kid, I need that!”

His hat was sitting on top of a snowman, who was also wearing one of his jackets. His smile was upside down, and El had put two sticks above his eyes, giving him a disgruntled look.

“I made a Snow-Hopper,” she said proudly. “His arms are crossed because he’s mad at all the other snowmen for annoying him. You like him?”

“It’s fine,” Hopper choked. “But I want my hat back.”

### 31. out with the old, in with the new

Inside it was loud with music and people talking and laughing. Outside it was cold and quiet.

El didn't particularly like the cold, but she did like the quiet. Sometimes the noise and lights and people were just too *much*.

Mike found her not long after she'd disappeared, wrapping one of his jackets around her. "You'll freeze to death."

El thought about the time she'd lived in the snowy, freezing woods wearing nothing but a dress and a plaid shirt. She didn't say anything, though, because it always hurt Mike when he remembered the year they were apart. Instead, she wrapped the jacket tighter around her and smiled up at him. "I'm okay."

Mike sat beside her, rubbing her back. "It's almost midnight."

"I know." She rested her head against his shoulder. "I just needed some quiet."

He kissed the top of her head. "You know, I was thinking--"

The door banged open, revealing Dustin, Lucas, Max, and Will.

"Are you guys making out already?" Dustin asked loudly.

"No they're not," Max said. "They don't look guilty enough." She plopped down beside El. "It's almost midnight."

"We know," Mike said with no small degree of irritation.

"Dustin's upset he doesn't have anyone to kiss."

"Yeah, about that--Mike, can I borrow your girlfriend?"

"Fuck off, Dustin."

"You can kiss Will," El said.

“No thank you,” said Will.

“Yeah, no thanks,” Dustin echoed.

“Then you can go inside and kiss your mommy,” Max said.

“Double no thanks. Besides, she’s kissing *your* mom.”

“TEN!” people inside shouted. “NINE! EIGHT! SEVEN! SIX! FIVE! FOUR! THREE! TWO! ONE! *HAPPY NEW YEAR !*”

Noisemakers went off inside. Outside, Mike and El kissed, as did Max and Lucas beside them. Dustin popped open a bottle of sparkling grape juice and passed it around as the adults inside began to sing.

*“ Should old acquaintance be forgot,*

*and never brought to mind?*

*Should old acquaintance be forgot,*

*and old lang syne?*

*For auld lang syne, my dear,*

*for auld lang syne,*

*we'll take a cup of kindness yet,*

*for auld lang syne.”*